



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 20 March 2025

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Building

**Present:**

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA  
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA  
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA  
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA  
Mr Brian Kingston MLA  
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA  
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

**Apologies:**

Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA

**In Attendance:**

Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)  
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)  
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)  
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)



## Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting commenced in open session at 10.00 a.m.

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – Private Landlord

### 1. Apologies

Andy Allen MBE MLA

### 2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee had previously agreed to hold a meeting in the Ulster Folk Museum, Cultra and a provisional date of 5 June has been agreed with the venue.

**Agreed:** That the meeting on Thursday 5 June is held at the Ulster Folk Museum, Cultra.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial statement on £153 million Financial Transaction Capital funding for Co-Ownership Housing Association. Members welcomed this announcement which will help more people to be able to buy a home.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.03 a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that, following this week's official announcement and the UKG Green Paper on cuts to disability benefits, last week the Committee had agreed to send letters to the Department (seeking NI-specific information and details of ongoing conversations with DWP) and the Secretary of State (regarding concerns and the specific NI circumstances and child poverty levels). As well as this, the Committee has sought the views of counterpart committees in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly with a view to making a collective case to the UKG on these proposed cuts which will affect many of the most vulnerable people in society.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the **Department** to ask the following:



## Northern Ireland Assembly

- Based on data that is available, how many people on PIP achieve the four points in at least one daily living category and how many do not
- If the Department knows (at this point) the specific number of people in Northern Ireland that will be affected by the proposed changes in disability benefits
- How the Department is going to increase its communications in relation to the proposed changes
- If the Department is ready for the anticipated changes in relation to employment support and support into work
- What is the current level of support being provided in terms of Employment Support services (numbers of roles and locations)
- Whether the Department is planning for any additional Employment Support Programmes to be delivered via the and Voluntary and Community sector (who have been highlighted ENICs pressures and the lack of certainty in relation to the Shared Prosperity funding) – as Committee Members are concerned that existing groups will not be in a position to be able to react.
- A costed table (based on the employment support programmes suggested in Scotland and Wales) if these or similar programmes were to be rolled out in Northern Ireland

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the **Minister** to ask the following:

- What conversations are ongoing with the Department of Health and Department for Economy as Members noted additional investment announced for both Health and Economy in GB aligning to supports for the disability benefit changes and would like to know whether there are similar plans being for Northern Ireland
- To ask the Minister to lobby for an additional Barnett consequential to fund the required employment support measures, particularly with the cuts in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- A timeframe for the roll out of the disability benefit changes

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the **Minister for the Economy** to ask about the changes proposed for 18-22 year olds and whether there will be any



## Northern Ireland Assembly

additional employment support, via a Barnett consequential, and to ask for the timeframe for rolling out the proposed changes.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the **Committee for the Economy** to ask if it is aware of or has sought the reaction from employers to the proposed changes to disability payments and in particular to the “trying out” work proposal in particular and to ask what measures are currently in place for 18-22 year olds. The Committee would also like to know if Northern Ireland is ready for the proposed changes.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had been asked to attend a NICVA event, as Chairperson, on Tuesday 25 March at 1pm in the senate chamber.

### 3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 13 March 2025.

**Agreed:** That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

### 4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Mid and East Antrim	Youth Homelessness
Department for Communities	SL1 - The Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations (Northern Ireland)
Assembly Communications Press	Clippings - Announcement re Welfare Policy Reform
Department for Communities	Rebranding of Universal Credit Contingency Fund



## Northern Ireland Assembly

### 5. Correspondence

NI Fiscal Council - The NI Executive's 2025-26 Draft Budget: an assessment

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the NI Fiscal Council to ask it to elaborate on its comments in the report in relation to transparency around fees generated and if they have any queries about transparency that they would like answered by the Department.

Dept for Communities - Welfare Mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel Report 2022 and Independent Advisory Panel Report on Welfare Mitigations - Full Year Estimated Cost of Implementation paper

**Agreed:** That a briefing on the revised estimates and report options is arranged for a future meeting.

Committee for Finance - Final Budget 2025-26 proposals

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more information on the bids it has submitted to DoF (2025-26) for additional Financial Transaction Capital.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Committee for Finance	2025-26 draft Budget response – request to forward any updates received regarding funding for housing adaptations, new build housing and Housing Investment Strategy
Imagine	Festival details

The Committee noted the following tabled items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
NEA	Copy of responses to Fuel Strategy Consultation by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NEA</li></ul>



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Source	Summary of content
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Fuel Poverty Coalition</li></ul>
Department for Communities	Press Release: Next generation of traditional craftspeople encouraged to apply for All
Department for Communities	Press Release: Historic Environment Division (HED) host Listed Buildings Owners Forum

**6. S.R. 2025/52 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (NI) 2025**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered S.R. 2025/52 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

**7. SR 2025/53 - The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (NI) 2025**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/53 - The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

**8. Departmental briefing on Fuel Poverty Strategy**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Angus Kerr – Director of Climate Change Division

Una McConnell – Head of Fuel Poverty Strategy and Departmental Climate Change Action Plan



## Northern Ireland Assembly

Meabh Cormacain – Strategic Advisor Fuel Poverty Strategy

Adrian Boyce – Head of Home Energy

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.41 a.m.

A question-and-answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were:

- The timeline for publication of the strategy
- Responses received to the Department's consultation
- Targets for reduction of fuel poverty in the strategy
- Interaction between this strategy and the Housing Supply Strategy and the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- The breakdown of the consultation responses between organisations and individuals
- Links with the Energy Strategy and work on climate change
- Energy Performance Certificates
- Retrofitting
- Planning reform
- Assessment of the levels of fuel poverty across Northern Ireland
- Planning for financial support for winter 2025
- Engagement with the Department of Health
- The need for a One Stop Shop
- Minimum energy efficiency standards
- Budget for the strategy
- Rollout / implementation of the strategy
- Incentives for moving away from fossil fuels
- Affordable Warmth Scheme

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it can provide a map of the most vulnerable areas of Northern Ireland in terms of fuel poverty and if it doesn't have such a map at present, can one be prepared.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

**Agreed:** That Bayview Contracts NI is contacted in relation to sending a written briefing paper on retrofitting to the Committee.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to SSE Airtricity in relation to the recent announcement of the closure of its energy services division in Northern Ireland. The Committee would like to understand, in more detail, the rationale for the decision and to know when this decision was communicated to the Department.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.26 a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.33 a.m.

### **9. Briefing by NUS-USI on student housing and affordability survey**

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Kieran Minto, President of Queen's Students' Union

Ethan Davies, President of Ulster University Students' Union

Ben Friel, President NUS-USI

A question-and-answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were:

- Purpose built student accommodation
- Student housing co-operatives
- Guarantor requirements and possible reforms
- Standard of student accommodation
- Hardship grants
- Use of food banks
- Engagement with the universities on increasing student support
- Impacts on mental health





## Northern Ireland Assembly

- Student dropout rates
- The expansion of Magee campus
- Regional balance
- Course fees

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask under what legislation the regulation of student Landlords and the landlord guarantor scheme falls and to ask whether there is any plan for review.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council to ask how the Landlord Registration Scheme links in with student landlords and what work is ongoing to ensure landlords are registering and maintaining student properties appropriately.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to Belfast City Council to ask what level of engagement it has with the private rented sector in respect of student accommodation, how it is inspecting and enforcing standards around houses in multiple occupation and how it is proactively raising awareness of the EHS services for students.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.30 p.m.

### **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

### **11. Any other business**

There was no other business.

### **12. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 27 March 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.32 p.m.



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Colm Gildernew MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**